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Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your letter of 25 May about child sexual exploitation, following events in towns across the country. I am sorry for the delay in my reply.

Firstly, I would like to thank you for congratulating me on my appointment and assure you that I remain committed to ensuring we protect vulnerable children from the abhorrent crimes of abuse and exploitation.

This Government attaches the highest priority to tackling child sexual exploitation. We have declared it a national threat and this categorisation remains in force to empower police forces to apply their best skills and expertise to tackle the problem.

Since declaring child sexual exploitation a national threat, we have seen an increase in police activity to tackle these abhorrent crimes. The number of recorded child sexual offences has increased and this has led to rises in the number of offenders being brought to justice.

Turning to your points about data sharing on children at risk, the Government recognises that statutory guidance and regulator expectations place clear obligations on certain organisations to ensure that there are measures in place to safeguard children and vulnerable adults. The Data Protection Act 2018, which received Royal Assent on 23 May, recognises the importance of safeguarding by including a bespoke provision on information sharing for safeguarding purposes. During the development of the new Act, the Government worked with stakeholders in the voluntary and private sectors to ensure that the new law would cover all the safeguarding activities that are expected of organisations with responsibility for the welfare of children and vulnerable adults.

We believe the law is now clear. However, we understand that there is still work to do to make sure that practitioner guidance is updated accordingly and that a clear message reaches those working on the ground. Work is underway across government to ensure that departments are coordinated in their messaging on information sharing for safeguarding purposes. I understand that further guidance is available from the Information Commissioner's Office's Data Sharing Code and this is being updated to reflect the recent changes.

Turning to your specific concerns about research, I would like to assure you that improving our understanding of the scale and nature of all forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse is a priority for this Government. This is a complex topic and the work of the Centre of Expertise is critical to our understanding of the model of offending we have seen in Rotherham, Telford, Newcastle and elsewhere. The Centre of Expertise's project to develop a typology of child sexual offending will help us to identify the similarities and differences between child sexual exploitation by organised networks and other types of offending which will support a more targeted response by the police and other agencies.

I recognise that offending involving grooming by organised networks is of particular concern. I am fully committed to taking the steps necessary to improving our understanding of how this pernicious form of offending can best be prevented.

To this end, my officials have been working with investigating officers in relevant cases, and with the National Crime Agency, to establish the particular characteristics and contexts associated with this type of offending. We are looking at what this data set can tell us about the characteristics of offenders, victims and the wider context of abuse; all of which have critical bearing on the effective targeting of prevention activity.

With specific reference to offender motivations, you will be aware that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse is investigating child sexual exploitation by organised networks. As part of this investigation, the Inquiry has announced its intention to carry out research to seek a better understanding of the background, characteristics and motivations of these perpetrators, how organised networks are formed and sustained, and how they target children for the purposes of sexual exploitation. This will involve interviewing convicted perpetrators of child sexual exploitation offences. The findings from this research are intended to provide new insights into the steps that national and local agencies can take to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation, and to better protect children in the future.

We will be following the progress of this research carefully. If there is a need for further research, we will take it forward.

I want to thank you for taking the time to write on this important matter and I hope this response reassures you on the work the Government is taking forward to tackle the issues you have referred to and that we remain determined to do all that we can to protect all children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation.



Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP